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MEANS OF IMPROVING TEACHING OF THE CLASSICS IN THE COLLEGES

Editorial

Contributors to our Classical periodicals have concerned themselves very much with the methods of teaching Greek and Latin in our Secondary Schools. They have had less to say about Collegiate instruction. That this is in some institutions not merely inferior to the common achievements of a High School, but very bad indeed is indicated by several caustic criticisms that have recently shocked the writer, coming as they did from well-wishers of the Classics who have investigated conditions with some care. Admitting that we cannot reach and affect the moribund teachers in certain Colleges who seem to be doing their deadliest to make Latin and Greek dead languages, may not we, who have given at least one sign of being alive by subscribing to *THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY*, further the pedagogy of our subject by discussing, trying, and then advertizing such improvements in the methods of teaching as experience may from time to time suggest?

There is, for example, one change for the better which College professors have been gradually adopting that deserves ampler encouragement. Exercises in translation at sight now play a larger rôle in the class-room both as a means of imparting knowledge and as a valid test of the students' acquirements than they did a generation ago. Through work of this sort we can perhaps best meet some of the severest and most justifiable censure that is directed against all Collegiate instruction, heighten the student's interest in our special subject, and really make the most of the peculiar advantages which we ascribe to the study of the Classics, rightly, but not always convincingly to our opponents.

Deep down in our souls we College professors know very well that lectures play altogether too large a part in the instruction of undergraduates. This excess is more responsible than anything else that is under our control for the habits of laziness, the lack of mental discipline, the superficiality, the thirst for mere entertainment that characterizes so many College students. In certain subjects, to be sure, a lecture system is unescapable, but it needs much more backbone than it commonly gets, and that is to be brought about through quizzes, conferences and examinations, supplements which require a large corps of assistants. There

is, furthermore, no branch of instruction in which a certain minimum of lecturing is not desirable for inspirational or unifying purposes, as, for instance, in Latin, where we must preserve courses in the history of the literature and on the life of the people in order to correlate the student's scattered information and give him some vitalizing, vivid picture of a distant age. But making all due allowance for these unavoidable exceptions, who that knows the American College and is sincerely interested in having its graduates leave with some abiding knowledge, some mental and moral stamina, some fearlessness of work, some half-way willingness to do the disagreeable duty as well as the pleasurable task would not eliminate a considerable number of existing courses as superfluous or actually demoralizing? No one can remain long in ignorance of the situation who reviews with graduate students their past career or serves as an adviser of upperclassmen under a free elective-rejective system and learns their preferences in 'snap courses'. With the frankness that makes youth so lovable, they give merry descriptions of mumbling lecturers under whom the pupils sleep, vaudeville jesters under whom they laugh and loaf, masters of 'appreciative criticism' under whom they become devotees to some single author and zealots who make them some sort of —ist or other. No wonder that some students seem like human blotters, absorbing in their mollescent brains the thoughts of those who tell them what to think. No man, we venture to say, deserves more credit than the teacher who, being forced by the nature of his subject to a lecture system, organizes it effectively and makes it really tell for education, as some professors somehow manage to do. Theirs is the most exacting of all College problems.

But we classicists are not so forced. Our privilege is the recitation system, and, if we do not make the most of it, it is our own fault. The question is, Do we? How many Classical departments are wholly innocent of courses where a premium is set upon cramming, where memorizing counts for more than reasoning, where bright-faced attention seduces the teacher into learned or vaporous digressions, where a 'trot' is almost wholly responsible for the translations, where the examination covers only the review and may be safely braved after a mere ephemeral industry?

Now, perhaps the best corrective for these weaknesses, which constitute in a way a betrayal of our trust, is to be found in a greater resort to sight work. At least in

the Freshmen courses, where increased facility in reading the language and not purely literary appreciation is the primary desideratum, we might profitably assign to this method of instruction the last fifteen minutes of every fifty-five minute period. During the other forty, we can cover the prepared work, devoting twenty-five minutes to recitations by the students and the other fifteen to a rapid interpretation by the teacher of what is not recited. The portions of the text chosen for their recitation and for our own translation must, of course, be picked erratically so as to insure on the part of each pupil the extra-mural preparation of the entire lesson. Monthly hour-examinations suffice to test what is remembered of the review and to insure a faithful performance of the daily stint. But the term-examination in any course should be a test of power, and should, therefore, be almost exclusively at sight. By such a system the student who has worked honestly and really knows his Latin or his Greek then comes into his own, and neither Mr. Bohn nor Mr. Loeb can save the shirker, and the 'cram artist' is balked of his present unfair profit. Under these conditions, the ignorant have a permanent temptation to learn their grammar, to increase their vocabulary by memorizing word-lists and in general to secure all the training that they can get from their instructors.

Moreover, only by attacking a new text with a pupil can you acquire any trustworthy insight into his methods of study and his mental processes. Our neglect to show weak students how to work is often censured as a pedagogical crime. As a matter of fact, it is the boy who prepares a perfect lesson who most merits discerning help and yet through the very excellence of his recitation he robs himself of class-room criticism. Another point: there is no more legitimate way in which the teacher can make his subject interesting than by giving those under him a sense of progress, and experience proves that nothing forwards a Latin student more and makes him realize his rate of improvement more vividly than well conducted translating at sight. By it one may readily enlist the concentrated and simultaneous attention of all one's hearers, directing rapid-fire questions at random or calling for a concert of replies. The class covers much more ground. This is an important consideration; for the small compass of the Latin read by a Freshman, plus the feeling that the subject is almost as hard for him at the end of the year as when he entered, may prompt him to drop the study altogether.

Again, sight translation affords an opportunity to diversify the instruction by introducing brief passages from authors of other ages, even, it may be, late compositions which indicate how Latin was always a living, growing language, and illustrate fascinating linguistic phenomena. Nothing, in fact, quickens class-room interest more than the introduction of some novelty or surprise, an ingenious or amusing epigram from the Anthology, a riddle of Symphosius, a bit taken from Erasmus, a few sententiae of Syrus, or the like. There

is, indeed, no need to steal the cream from literature which is later to be read, but one should go far afield. The compilation of such excerpts, which are easily printed for class-room use on a mimeograph, broadens the teacher's own reading and frees him from enslavement to a few text-books. Etymologizing in various languages inevitably figures large in any exercise in sight translation, and, if one of the main justifications for studying the Classics, their serviceability to English, does not thereby appear, it never will.

And, finally, there is yet another important benefit. This method preeminently compels the College professor to *teach*, discovers to him his defects, and may even make him accessible to information from specialists in education that will mend his pedagogy. It is an excellent antidote to certain evil effects of over-indulgence in lecturing, illusions about one's skill and wit and learning that are sure to come when the utterances are all *ex cathedra* and there is no response *ex scamnis*, no 'come-back' as the boys express it.

No, we teachers of Greek and Latin must run no risk of being merely entertainers. These are the days when the very word 'discipline' is taboo, and the word 'interest' is a term to conjure with, when otherwise sane people worship individualism as a *numen* and fear nothing so much as that American youth—*Iocus meuservell*—may yield its will and descend to the demeaning obedience of a soldier. If, then, we are convinced that the study of the Classics has a disciplinary and a general educational value second to none, let us leave no method unused that will ensure their greater effectiveness. But whatever else we do, let us at any rate avoid those very weaknesses that mark the inferiority of certain other studies as training for College youth of our American type. Our first responsibility is to teach and to teach so well that every pupil realizes that he is being educated and not merely saved from some spells of ennui.

WALTON BROOKS MCDANIEL.

VERGIL AND NATURE

(*Vergil, Georgics, Book 2*)

There are few allusions to the beauties of Nature in the fragments of Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Pacuvius, or Accius. Ennius, however, surprises us with many descriptive epithets of sky, sea, trees, and animals, and by the poetic beauty of his lines, some of which Vergil borrowed: *Caelum suspexit stellis fulgentibus aptum; Iuppiter hic risit, tempestatesque serenae riserunt omnes risu Iovis omnipotentis; mare marmor; laetus ager.*

Varro seems to have felt some human sympathy with animals, especially wild animals and birds, and to have shown appreciation of the stars, winds, rain, and sea. Lucretius, of course, is in a class by himself. Miss Katharine Allen, in an essay called *The Treatment of Nature in the Poetry of the Roman Republic*,¹ 182, says of Lucretius:

¹See the *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, No. 28 (1899).